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“What is Starmerism?” - Reflections on Some Early Indications

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Keir Starmer has been leader of the UK Labour Party for one month. Early in the leadership contest Rebecca Long-Bailey was touted, as the Corbynite candidate, the most likely to find favour with the membership to replace Jeremy Corbyn. However, new members who had not sympathised with Corbyn joined to vote for Starmer. Soft left and right members supported him. And some Corbynites turned to Starmer as the candidate seen most likely to win the next general election. Starmer's messages during the leadership campaign stayed open enough to keep many from all wings of the party on board.

Starmer campaigned on a platform that there was no point to Labour unless they could win power and that four times since 2010 they had excluded themselves from being in that position. Unity and an end to factionalism was, he said, key to electoral success. But Starmer also commended Corbyn's shifting of Labour to an anti-austerity position and said it was not the right time to steer away from the broad policy positions of the previous leader.

It's early days and a lot could change but what this has led to so far, I want to argue, is technocratic ambiguity alongside factionalist anti-factionalism. What this means in terms of ideology and policy is unclear, deliberately so. Starmer needs to appeal across the breadth of the UK's fractionalised diverse social structure, not to mention across his own party, but I think there are substantive and committed clear policy bases on which he can do so.

The search for unity in Starmer's Labour

Starmer argued throughout the leadership campaign for unity and an end to factionalism. We can't win if we keep 'taking lumps out of each other' has been a frequent and continuing refrain. During the leadership campaign the candidates mostly stuck to this, the benefit for Starmer that he was protected from criticism by the other contenders. But what does unity mean and where will it lead?

Early clues came with Starmer's appointments to the [Labour frontbench](#). The soft left took over dominance of the shadow cabinet, anti-Corbyn right-wingers given junior front bench jobs. The number of Corbynites in the top teams were significantly reduced. This seems less an end to factionalism than one group being put in the driving seat and other others kept down.

I want to outline what form 'unity' under Starmer could take and what it could mean if a substantive approach were taken to bridging across the party and electorate. There are 9 ways you can look at Starmer's approach to pursuing unity, three of them [outlined by Oliver Eagleton](#).

Firstly, unity can be built on reconciling differences and building *consensus* and a common view on ideology and policy. But the Labour Party has always been a broad church, as its MPs have liked to repeat. Differences are of genuine and reasonable ideological kinds, not least between mitigating social democrats and reforming democratic socialists who want a different kind of society, and many other positions along that spectrum. Factionalism is [built into Labour](#) and politics in general is inherently conflictual. The differences in Labour can be healthy or pursued unhealthily. But there are essential ideological differences and consensus across them is not possible.

A second approach is *compromise*. The factions of the party can reach a compromise over a programme that is far from perfect for any of them but which they can mostly agree on to win power, implement and make the world a better place. So, a negotiated agreement. Agreed compromises are less than consensus but more possible. The differences to be overcome to achieve this across the party still provide a mountain to climb and so far Starmer is not proposing anything of substance around which negotiated agreement can be built. But he has only been leader for a month and hopefully this is to come. I want to come back to this in the second half of this article.

Thirdly, while factions of the party may not be able to forge a consensus or negotiate an agreement they can compromise on, they could call a *truce or ceasefire* to stop any fighting and win power. They may not all be able to agree to the programme but they can suppress dissent over it. This might be possible for a while but is unlikely to last. A truce can only hold so long under the pressure of real differences in ideology, policy and objectives. It will need to be built on something substantive in common, maybe coupling with one of the other options outlined. In fact, truce (option 3) plus negotiated agreement (option 2) is what Starmer has [said he means by unity](#).

Fourthly, Starmer may be able to mobilise a *hegemonic* position, where he sets out an ideological and policy programme of ruling ideas that can mobilise people behind it. So, while a programme may not be agreed by all, hegemonic leadership around a narrative that wins enough acquiescence to establish dominance for his leadership can save the day. Here one faction or factions may lead, and the others fall into place. Starmer does not yet have an evident clear ideology or perspective and the dominant group in the PLP, the [soft left](#), may not either. They have tended to swing behind the dominant strand in the party and pursue moderately left policies that are electorally possible rather than having an [approach driving them](#) that could become hegemonic. The Corbynite left has more of a worked-out approach so Starmer could build from that basis to develop a hegemonic project.

A fifth method is more pragmatic: live with the differences in the party but try to *manage them*. Each faction can be given enough in terms of jobs and policies to keep them happy and in place behind the overall project. However, while the soft left in Starmer's Labour are getting the main jobs and the right more than before, the firm left are not being kept on board in this way and Starmer's policies are not yet clear enough to be a tool for managing the factions.

A sixth and stronger approach is *marginalisation*. This is not one where rival groups are hegemonically kept behind the leader's project, but where they are marginalised to the extent they have minor or peripheral roles, giving them a place but keeping them away from power. It involves marginalisation of some rather than overall unity, and this seems to be in part what is going on, so far at least.

Seventhly, one way of achieving unity is through *ambiguity*. The leader is vague and promises things with enough lack of precision and concrete detail to avoid alienating people, but with [enough and sufficiently abstractly](#) to give all something and keep them on board. This seems to be what Starmer is doing so far. [His 10 pledges](#), for instance, appear, on the surface, to keep to the Corbynite stance of the party, useful when appealing to members for their vote in the leadership contest. Where they are specific is on pledges that are less controversial for Labour members. Otherwise they are defined in an abstract enough way to be acceptable to many whilst being open to taking quite varying concrete forms in practice. Starmer's pre-parliament past and his voting record as an MP make it [difficult to pin down](#) where his ideology and policy preferences are. This could be because he genuinely is open within the bounds of his soft left instincts.

Eighthly, Starmer can manage the factions of the party by arguing decisions need to be made [technocratically](#): keeping different people together by saying ideology and policy have to be guided by what is possible to win an election and power. Politics is inherently conflictual and so potentially disunifying. So, one way to achieve something that looks like unity is anti-political, suppressing disunity through technocracy, arguing for the necessary to try to push aside difference and contestation. Technocracy was what the anti-austerity left was replacing in parts of Europe, or trying to, albeit a technocracy for different reasons and in different circumstances. In the context of Starmer's Labour it may be framed in terms of pursuing professionalism and competence.

Ninthly, it seems possible that Starmer so far is carrying out a *combination* of some of these approaches: technocratic ambiguity, with marginalisation of the Corbynite left and participation of the right in lower down roles. Marginalisation of a faction is not unity or anti-factionalism but incomplete unity and suppression of a faction: *factional anti-factionalism*. This is coupled with ambiguity on substance. Starmer's Labour is not a return to either Corbynism or Blairism. A return to neoliberal social democracy is not sought by most in the Labour Party and a continuation of Corbynism not wanted by the soft left or right. These are not being replaced yet with anything new in substance; but with ambiguity about what is being pursued and a technocratic approach presented as competence, professionalism and electability: *technocratic ambiguity*.

Beyond ambiguity and factionalism to the next election

If electability is the focus the question is what will win votes to get Labour into power at the next election. One way is to stick to professionalism and competence, with manufactured unity and the suppression of factionalism, that will appeal to the electorate across the board. In such an approach the party avoids too much in the way of ideas or policies that offer hostages to fortune and may win over parts of Labour's complex social base but at the expense of alienating others. Pundits have argued for [competence](#) as the top electoral

priority, advising against appealing on the basis of [policy now](#). Corbyn's leadership was allegedly not competent or professional and Starmer's shadow cabinet choices and approach so far have been defined [in terms of competence](#).

If policy is to be developed, it is argued, the party should orient to where voters are rather than where Labour wants them to be. Starmer's appointment of Claire Ainsley as his Director of Policy suggests he may be navigating down this road. [She has argued](#) that finding what working class voters feel and adapting policy to that is the way to go, rather than starting from the point of trying to persuade them of the policy approach you feel may actually benefit them.

It is not crystal clear that lack of professionalism and competence were what put electors off Corbyn in the 2019 election; nor that lack of these as opposed to challenges to his leadership from his own MPs were what undermined Corbyn's position in the party - in other words factionalism, political conflict, and lack of professionalism towards Corbyn, as the [leaked party report](#) exposed. What gets sneered at as incompetence in political leadership is often decisions made as the result of conflict and attempts to negotiate it, more the outcome of politics than lack of professionalism; the handling of anti-Semitism in Labour and the party's position on Brexit arguably being examples. And in the era of Trump and Johnson it is not certain that what makes Prime Ministerial material for voters is professionalism and competence.

It is in substance as much as style that Labour needs to win support for the next election. Not building support for policy, and ambiguity on some of it, were part of what sunk Labour in 2019. So, as Starmer himself said during the leadership campaign, Labour needs to start defining policy early and building the case for it over time. The electorate is very diverse in many ways, and Labour requires support widely across it meaning that promises made to some groups that are less appealing to others will not work. However real unity and wide appeal can be made on the basis of policy. This can be on Labour's [democratic economy](#) and [green new deal](#) policies. These were central to Labour's programme under Corbyn but [kept quite quiet](#) in the [2019 election campaign](#).

Across MPs and the Labour Party, social ownership of one form or another has appeal despite Blair's campaign to rid Labour of its commitment to public ownership. It is classic Labour territory and has become part of the mainstream again. And [social ownership proposals](#) under Corbyn were across a range of types, local and national, decentralised and centralised, from co-ops to state ownership, in a market rather than a planned economy, providing something for all wings of the party to agree with. Where public ownership of rail, mail, energy and water were proposed this was not simply in the form of old-style state ownership, even though that is back in vogue, but sometimes localised and with more democratically inclusive ownership. This is not just steered by whichever politicians are in power and run by managers, often from the private sector, but incorporating workers, managers, consumers and communities in democratic control and with clear social and ethical rather than just efficiency goals. Social ownership, furthermore, is not just an idea. In addition to its longstanding past it has recent successful concrete bases in initiatives like [community wealth building](#) in UK and USA municipalities in which local government procurement is used to ensure money is reinvested in poor areas, co-ops and social and

ethical aims rather than disappearing away to corporate shareholders and goals that benefit them.

The green new deal also has resonance. The Labour Party is committed to tackling climate change and the green new deal proposes measures to do this through policies of industrial restructuring and investment in green industry to create jobs and demand that assist the unemployed, working class, poor, excluded and minorities. The democratic economy and green new deal can stimulate support from the right to the Corbynite left in the party, all of whom are behind their social and environmental ends and can find something in the diverse means for pursuing them, local and national, democratic and inclusive. They can bring substance to Starmer's emphasis on unity and anti-factionalism, through negotiated agreement, the second method for pursuing unity outlined above, which, while short of consensus, can be a basis also for the third approach of truce and ceasefire.

The same bridging can be done with such policies across the public. Polls suggest the electorate are willing to vote for [action on climate change](#) and support the green new deal including [in areas Labour needs to hold or win](#). Social ownership policies have [public support](#). From red wall towns to wider sections of society the electorate want to see investment, economic rejuvenation and measures to tackle insecurity, exclusion and poverty, something both policy approaches aim at and have concrete records on. Economic rejuvenation to tackle exclusion and unemployment coupled with green change and local inclusive democracy relate to the politics of both northern town working class voters and young educated metropolitan electors. This is a better way to go policy-wise than staying ambiguous on policy to avoid the risk of alienating someone or by appealing to the lowest common denominator. In Scotland this approach will have to be coupled with radical proposals for devolution to draw voters back from the SNP. And an economy of community investment fits with post Covid-19 rebuilding in an era where austerity has less of a ring to it than ten years ago.

One of Starmer's criticisms of the 2019 electoral strategy was that there were too many policies being propounded, introduced too late to be built for. Labour needs a focused narrative for the next election, if not as narrow as 'Get Brexit Done', built for over time. The democratic economy and green new deal are in place in detail and could be the axis around which this is done. The left is at an advanced state policy-wise and in a good place to build support for well-established policies. The solution is to make the [politics work for the policy](#) and use policy as the basis for the politics. It is not to side-line policy especially where it meets the criterion for a focused, substantive message with appeal across groups.

Starmer seems at this stage to be pursuing technocratic ambiguity and factional anti-factionalism in the name of unity and election victory. But these are early days. He can move on from ambiguity to ambitious substance and bring together factions by approaches that unusually have an appeal to different wings of the party and across the electorate from the young, middle class and educated, both public sector and private sector voters, to the more working class and excluded. The policy is there. It needs the politics.